

An ADL Special Report

Malcolm X: On The Record

An Analysis of His Views

- On Race
- Jews and Israel
- On Civil Rights



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In the final year of his life, before his death at the hands of Nation of Islam assassins on February 21, 1965, Malcolm X stepped from behind the long-fixed barricades of black supremacy and anti-Semitism into an evolving position marked by a more inclusive vision of humanity. This conversion was not without ambivalence: he never ceased to believe that America was "the worst racist society on earth," and even the most humanistic remarks of this last year were often laced with skepticism and on occasion with racist derision. But there is little question that Malcolm's beliefs were undergoing a signal transformation; moreover, the statements of his final weeks suggest that these changes may have blossomed into a more fully articulated and challenging humanism had his life not been prematurely ended.

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Malcolm's views during his twelve years as a Nation of Islam minister, from 1952 until 1964, were largely racist and anti-Semitic. He believed in the absolute evil of the white race: "These aren't white people," he told audiences. "You're not using the right language when you say the white man. You call it the devil. When you call him the devil, you're calling him by his name, and he's got another name -- Satan; another name -- serpent; another name -- snake; another name -- beast."

Malcolm argued that an apocalyptic race war between the long oppressed black people and their white oppressors, in which Allah would exact punishment for the white man's crimes, was imminent. "We, the Black men of the world; created the white man and we will also kill him," he maintained; according to an FBI report: "only in this way will there be peace." On another occasion, the FBI records Malcolm urging his followers: "Do not have love in your heart for this man because he is about to be destroyed and if you love him, you will be destroyed along with him."

While references to a war of armageddon became less frequent in Malcolm's speeches over time, he maintained the notion that integration "was a trick on the part of the white man to lull Negroes to sleep." He argued that efforts at integration would only result in token gestures by the "Caucasian devil slavemaster": "any forcible attempt to integrate America completely would result in another Civil War," he remarked in a May 1963 Playboy interview, "a catastrophic explosion among whites which would destroy America -- and still not solve the problem." Only separate nations, he contended, would solve America's racial problem.

Malcolm's invectives were frequently directed at the white "liberals" who aided the civil rights movement, and at the black leaders who spearheaded it. Black integrationists were said to have "black bodies with white heads," and were characterized as "black puppets" or Uncle Toms: "This twentieth-century Uncle Thomas is a professional Negro...by that I mean his profession is being a Negro for the white man."

White liberals, financing and working with Uncle Tom integrationists, contrived to trick and subdue the black population. Malcolm told Playboy in May 1963 that "a man who tosses worms in the river isn't necessarily a friend of the fish. All the fish who take him for a friend, who think the worm's got no hook in it, usually end up in the frying pan. All these things dangled before us by the white liberal posing as a friend and benefactor have turned out to be nothing but bait to make us think we're making progress."

Malcolm believed that among the white liberals undermining the black population, Jews were prominent. He called the Jews "one of the worst of the devils," and contended: "He does more to take advantage of the so-called black people than any other and yet poses as being a friend to the black people."

In the May 1963 Playboy interview, Malcolm elucidated another aspect of what he saw as Jewish "hypocrisy": "The Jew is always anxious to advise the black man. But they never advise him to solve his problem the way the Jews

solved their problem....The Jews pooled their money, and bought the hotels that barred them. They bought Atlantic City and Miami Beach and anything else they wanted. Who owns Hollywood?...When there's something worth owning, the Jew's got it."

Malcolm regularly depicted Jewish businessmen and landlords as the leading exploiters of blacks in ghettos. A June 30, 1963, article in the New York Herald Tribune quotes Malcolm maintaining that the teachings of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad were "putting the Jews who control all the liquor stores in Harlem out of business...and so it's they who are spreading that he teaches hate." At another rally, shortly after his break with Muhammad in 1964, Malcolm responded to a question about the Holocaust with an anti-Semitic gibe: "Everybody talks about the six million Jews. But I was reading a book the other day that showed that one hundred million of us were kidnapped and brought to this country -- one hundred million. Now everybody's wet-eyed over a handful of Jews who brought it on themselves."

At the same time, Malcolm recognized similarities between the historical Jewish experience and the black experience in America. His defamatory description of "a handful of Jews" bringing the Holocaust on themselves arose in part from his belief in the evils of integration: in the Autobiography, he argued that the fate of Jews in Nazi Germany was "history's most tragic result of...assimilating." Moreover, on more than one occasion he cited the creation of Israel -- achieved through an oppressed people's use of force, as he saw it -- as a model for American blacks: "and then the Jews set up Israel, their own country -- the one thing that every race of man in the world respects, and understands."

Malcolm journeyed on a pilgrimage to Mecca in April 1964, one month after his fractious break with the Black Muslims. This euphoric five-week trip -- during which he reported his discovery of "true" Islam and his repudiation of black supremacy -- marked the start, publicly, of the movement toward racial

fellowship that defined his final months.

His remarks regarding Jews and Israel immediately grew more admiring. "Just as the American Jew is in harmony (politically, economically and culturally) with world Jewry," he wrote from Africa two weeks after the pilgrimage, "it is time for all African-Americans to become an integral part of the world's Pan-Africanists." He later stated that the "strong emotional attachment" between Jews and Israel "has intensified the individual Jew's personal identification with the great Jewish historical tradition, and, he knows who he is as a man. This knowledge of one's self has enabled the Jew to become a highly effective man in this society..."

In an interview with the Village Voice published four days after his death, Malcolm elucidated once more the connections between the historical Jewish and black experiences:

The biggest difference between the parallel oppression of the Jew and the Negro is that the Jew never lost his pride in being a Jew. He never ceased to be a man. He knew he had made a significant contribution to the world, and his sense of his own value gave him the courage to fight back. It enabled him to act and think independently, unlike our own people and our leaders.

The respect Malcolm accorded Jews reflected a changing cast of mind. He spoke of "a new insight": "that the white man is not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly." When asked if he still favored the creation of a black state, he replied, "No, I believe in a society in which people can live like human beings on the basis of equality."

He maintained until his death the right of violent self-defense, but he also actively sought a place during his last year in the civil rights struggle that he had for so long derided. He said he would work "with anybody, anywhere": "I don't care what a person looks like or where they come from. My mind is wide open to anybody who will help get the ape off our backs."

His rhetoric, in his final weeks -- a time marked by his diminishing influence and the recurrent threat of assassination -- reflected a forthright humanism. "We don't judge a man because of the color of his skin," he told a Rochester audience in February 1965. "We don't judge you because you're white: we don't judge because you're black. We judge you because of what you do and what you practice." Two days before his murder, he told Life photographer Gordon Parks that his time in the Nation "was a bad scene, brother. The sickness and the madness of those days -- I'm glad to be free of them. It's a time for martyrs now. And if I'm to be one, it will be in the cause of brotherhood. That's the only thing that can save this country. I've learned it the hard way -- but I've learned it."

Ultimately, it would be misleading to portray Malcolm as a reborn black liberal. Despite his statements regarding brotherhood, his willingness to work with "sincere" whites, and his reversal on such issues as black nationhood and intermarriage, his past continued to weigh on him and shape his thoughts. In light of this past, however, and the pressures of his last year, his transformation during this time is exceptional. His change had integrity, in part, because of what it exacted. "I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else's control," he said shortly before he died. "I did many things as a Muslim that I'm sorry for now....Well, I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he's ready to pay the cost. It cost me twelve years."